

Message from the Chief

Chief's Memo – July 17, 2008

"CAL FIRE: Changing the play book in a wildfire emergency"

Beginning on Friday, June 20, 2008 a violent dry lightning storm crossed northern California covering the area from Monterey to the Oregon and Nevada borders. Of the approximate 8,000 lightning strikes produced by the storm, nearly 6,000 of them struck in California igniting over 2,000 wildfires on local, state, and federal lands. The area of coverage, duration and intensity of this storm are unprecedented.



In CAL FIRE's jurisdiction alone, there were over 1,000 simultaneous wildfires raging out of control. Although CAL FIRE is the largest fire department in the state, our firefighting resources were significantly challenged by the numbers and magnitude of this fire siege which is, in scope and severity, a major natural disaster. The United States Forest Service (USFS) and other federal firefighting agencies, along with local government fire departments worked together with the state to battle this round of California wildfires. In addition, CAL FIRE supported federal and local agencies on fires within their jurisdictions.

Seasoned weather experts were taken by surprise, as the severity of the storm which came from offshore was not forecast. Over the course of the fire siege, nearly 20,000 structures were threatened by wildfires, thousands of people were evacuated from their homes, and nearly 900,000 acres were burned. Amazingly, only 240 structures were destroyed, including 101 homes, by the wildfires. Tragically, one resident lost his life and two firefighters died while assigned to the fires.

During "normal" wildland firefighting, it is our practice and strategy to send an aggressive initial attack, including fire engines, bulldozers, aircraft, hand crews and fire ground commanders to a wildfire to keep fires small. This has successfully allowed us to keep approximately 95% of all wildfires within our jurisdiction to 10 acres or less.

However, fighting this vast number of lightning caused fires required firefighters to employ a different "play book" because it was not business as usual. Fires were grouped by geographic areas and each area's incident commander was allocated resources based on the greatest threat to life, property, and natural resources as determined by a California Multi-Agency Coordination system (CALMAC) which is composed of fire experts from local, state, and federal agencies.

Under the leadership of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, California has a well exercised mutual aid system. Along with a number of other agreements, the Master Mutual Aid system allows statewide firefighting resources to become an immediate part

of the emergency response. In this fire siege, in addition to the statewide response, assistance has come from 41 other states, as well as several other countries.

Exceptional assets brought to this historic firefighting effort in California included the National Guard troops called into action by Governor Schwarzenegger. In addition to their aviation assets, over 400 troops were outfitted, trained, and deployed to support firefighting efforts on the front lines by building and reinforcing containment lines to protect communities. An additional 2000 troops are in the process of being called and trained for future missions. Helicopter and fixed wing C-130 Modular Air Firefighter Systems (MAFFS) flew extensively in the aggressive firefight.

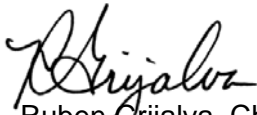
In addition to the National Guard, many Department of Defense military assets, from nearly every branch, were brought to bear on the firefight in California. Navy Reserve and Marine helicopters flew many missions. Intelligence gathering aviation technology was employed to provide real-time information to incident commanders.

NASA provided access to satellite information, as well as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). FEMA resources were deployed early into California to assist with coordination efforts and prepare for recovery. The level of cooperation at all levels of government was extraordinary. Non-government entities, private contractors, and volunteers numbered in the thousands. All of these partners are contributing to successful emergency responses to California wildfires.

While this lightning-caused siege may prove to be record breaking in many ways, other non-siege related emergencies continued to be responded to throughout California. Other "normal" emergency response activity did not slow down. During the period of time beginning at the onset of this siege on June 20th through July 13th, CAL FIRE responded to over 12,000 other emergency calls for service throughout the state, including over seven thousand medicals and rescue emergencies and hundreds of fires of all types.

Each year we prepare for the potential that our fire-prone state has for large scale disasters and damaging wildfires. Under the leadership of Governor Schwarzenegger all state agencies are more prepared than ever to lean forward and reach out to our federal and local partners to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters that may strike our Golden State.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Grijalva', written in a cursive style.

Ruben Grijalva, Chief
Director